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Change in U.S. monitoring lowers Soviet test violations

FROM COMBINED DISPATCHES

A change in the way the United States measures Soviet underground nuclear test explosions indicates fewer of them have violated a 1974 treaty than had been charged, a high-level U.S. official said today.

The change was approved by the CIA, the official said, and involves the interpretation of the force of the tests through seismologic data.

Because the main Soviet test site at Semipalatinsk in Central Asia is older and more stable geologically than the U.S. test site in the Nevada desert, scientists say Soviet explosions produce a larger sound wave through the earth than U.S. tests of the same size.

While the United States has long adjusted its intelligence estimates of Soviet tests to account for this, experts question whether the adjustment factor has been large enough. The matter has been under study for years.

A story in The New York Times yesterday quoted administration officials as saying the change was made Jan. 21 by CIA Director William Casey, despite objections from Pentagon officials. Richard Perle, assistant secretary of defense for international security policy, argued that the issue needed more study.

Experts familiar with the change say it will lower estimates of the yield of Soviet tests by about 20 percent.

The high-level official, who insisted on anonymity, said any measurement method involving seismology has considerable room for error.

He said that is why President Reagan has invited Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to

send observers to the U.S. test site to make on-site use of new technology.

The Threshold Test Ban Treaty limits underground weapons-test explosions on both sides to 150 kilotons, about 11 times the force of the U.S. atomic bomb that devastated Hiroshima toward the end of World War II. Although the Senate has never ratified the treaty, the U.S. government is complying with its provisions.

The Reagan administration has accused the Soviets of flouting the 1974 treaty and other accords. It has urged the Soviets to tighten verification procedures.

Before Mr. Casey made his decision, Mr. Reagan had ordered a report on how the change would affect administration concerns about Soviet violations, administration officials said. The report remains incomplete.

The high-level official said that even with the new CIA approach, a number of tests conducted by the Soviets were greater than 150 kilotons and still would be considered to be in violation.

U.S. accusations of Soviet arms-trial to U.S.-Soviet relations, with no significant progress occurring in this area since the November summit meeting between Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev.

Officials told the Times the new estimating procedure would be applied to the next Soviet test. The Soviet Union has not held a nuclear test since last summer, when it declared a unilateral moratorium on tests and asked the United States to join in a total test ban.

Asked for comment on the new procedure, CIA spokeswoman Kathy Pherson said, "We wouldn't have anything to say on that one way or the other."